

## Rail revival in Vermont to be big boost for New England

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BELLOWS FALLS, Vt. (AP) — Graceful stone arches tower over the Guilford Industries freight train as it plunges into a tunnel beneath the town square in this southern Vermont village, framing the train's boxcars and tankers — and the dilemma that the historic structure has posed for transportation across the state and region.

If there were just 7 inches or so more clearance to the ceiling of the 400-foot-long tunnel, it could accommodate double-stacked cars carrying containers from the port of Montreal or automobile rack cars from a port near Providence, R.I.

A \$2 million appropriation from the federal government is designed to make that happen, promising to help spur a rail revival in the state that officials say could also help to trigger business development throughout New England.

That money likely will be spent before winter sets in and state officials also are planning for the nearly \$40 million in other rail improvements that Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., was able to direct to his home state.

It's money that will pay for bridge and culvert rehabilitation and railbed improvements that will enable rail lines to connect eastern Canada and the northeastern United States. When the work is done, perhaps within five years, Vermont railroads will be capable of carrying the industry standard of 286,000 pounds per railcar, allowing railroads operating in the state to compete with any freight moving on the nation's network of rail.

"With the moneys that have been earmarked for the railroads, it definitely is going to impact business growth and it's also going to impact and give us the opportunity to take more trucks off our already crowded highways," said Charles Moore, regional vice president of Rail America, owner of New England Central Railroad based in St. Albans.

With the federal infusion of money, a very small amount in the context of the \$286 billion transportation plan approved by Congress last month, state and rail officials believe that millions of dollars worth of cargo will be flowing north and south between Montreal and southern New England and New York. Those were goods, generally in containers that came off ships, that either were shipped by truck or had to move by more circuitous routes.

When the Bellows Falls tunnel is rehabilitated by lowering its floor to accommodate taller trains, more of that will get to places such as Boston and Hartford, Conn., Worcester, Mass., and New York on a more direct route.

And an automobile port in Rhode Island now will have access to markets in Canada and the interior of the United States.

Railroad executives say the improvements could boost businesses already in the state, possibly attract new ones and contribute to the economic vitality of the region.

"If we intend to move freight through this state in an economic and efficient manner, we've got to begin to look to rail," said Charles Miller, director of rail for the Vermont Agency of Transportation. "It's an underutilized resource. ... It's a tremendous opportunity for the state. I think it can put us back on the map as far as rail."

A great deal of the track down the western side of the state and on a line splitting the state from Rutland to Bellows Falls is 80 years old. Many of the bridges have long passed the century mark. So some of them will have to be replaced and others will have to be beefed up to handle the heavier loads. But it's weight that won't be pounding the highways, said David Wulfson, president of Vermont Railway.

"The railroad's been overlooked for years," he said. "Now that fuel prices are what they are and trucking costs are what they are, more people are looking at railroads than ever have."

Railroad operators tout how much less expensive it is to ship with them than by truck. Charles Miller, director of rail at the Vermont Agency of Transportation, said rail can move 396 tons for every gallon of fuel it consumes. Trucking can move 136 tons for every gallon.

But it all starts in Bellows Falls, long the bottleneck in the rail network. The tunnel, built in 1851, passes beneath a flower shop on one side of the village square and the old Windham Hotel on the other. The buildings theoretically could have been demolished to make clearance for trains. Lowering its floor was the much less disruptive alternative, one that was done in the 1960s and again about 10 years again, Miller said.

"The Bellows Falls tunnel is a project that will benefit the whole state of Vermont and I think New England," Wulfson said. "It opens up another transportation alternative."